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Transit projects get federal funding

Light rail, Phalen Corridor, Union Depot make list

BY TOM WEBB
Washington Correspondent

WASHINGTON, D.C. — From light rail to Phalen Corridor, hundreds of Minnesota projects will receive more than \$200 million in federal funds, contained in a massive spending bill that emerged from behind closed doors Saturday morning, and then quickly passed Congress.

The bill includes \$1 million to study transit options at St. Paul's Union Depot, \$750,000 to rework the North St. Paul interchange of Minnesota 36 and McKnight Road, \$1.5 million to launch the Como Rider bus service, and \$415,000 in planning money to help the Bell Museum of Natural History move to Falcon Heights, said aides to U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, D-St. Paul.

Minnesota transportation projects fared especially well, due to the combined efforts of well-placed lawmakers from both parties. U.S. Sen. Mark Dayton, D-Minn., said that Minnesota enjoyed the largest percentage increase of any state in the nation.

Those projects include \$5 million toward completing the \$10 million final stage of _ St. Paul's Phalen Corridor, to run across the East Side from Arcade Street to Johnson Parkway. That's \$1 million less than city officials had dreamed of, but still, "I'm ecstatic, I'm thrilled," project director Curt Milburn said Saturday. If the state or city can come up with the rest, "the asphalt will be laid, the striping will be done by November of next year," Milburn said.

Until the final bill emerged early Saturday morning, Minnesota lawmakers couldn't be sure which hometown funds survived. Only a few hours later, both the House and Senate voted to pass the enormous bill.

The bill also contains the final \$33.1 million of the Hiawatha Corridor Light-Rail Project, a project that's been championed from the beginning by U.S. Rep. Martin Sabo, D-Minneapolis. Said Sabo's press secretary Jenifer McCormack, "Funding for the Hiawatha Corridor is fully in there, so that's very good news."

The appropriation bill also contained the final \$700,000 for construction of the Paul and Sheila Wellstone Center for Community Building on St. Paul's West Side. That project, by Neighborhood House, is the last slice of a \$10 million federal contribution and tribute to the late Minnesota senator, following his death in 2002.

U.S. Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., proudly cited a series of Minnesota projects and programs funded, but there was also a more personal effort. Coleman had championed the case of two teenagers from Veseli, Minn., whose family has been destroyed by the AIDS virus that their father contracted from a blood transfusion, received during treatment for a military service-related injury.

The legislation includes \$200,000 so that 19-year-old Brian Simon and 18-year-old Eric Simon can attend college and meet expenses, which they've been unable to do because they're full-time caregivers for their seriously ill father. Their mother and sister already have died from the disease.

"Words can't convey how proud I am of Eric and Brian, and I am so proud that my bill to help these boys was approved by the Congress and will be signed by the president," Coleman said.

The bill also contains: \$5 million toward improving access between Interstate 35W and Lake Street in Minneapolis, \$5 million for the Northstar Corridor commuter rail project, \$2.5 million for making access improvements to the port of Savage, \$10 million for the Minnesota 610/U.S. 10 interchange at Interstate 94, and \$10 million for replacing Metro Transit buses.

Other projects receiving funding:

- A Cedar Avenue Bus Rapid Transit corridor to be engineered between the Mall of America in Bloomington and Dakota County 70 in Lakeville will receive \$10 million.

- The state of Minnesota will get \$2.39 million to fight methamphetamine trafficking, as part of the Hot Spots Initiative that works to discover and dismantle drug labs.
- Twin Cities Rise, a job training program for low-income Minnesotans, will receive \$1 million that will help train 400 more Minnesotans.
- The city of St. Paul and Ramsey County are getting nearly \$1 million toward upgrading their communication system.
- Ramsey County's All Children Excel program will get \$667,000 to help reduce the number of high-risk minority children involved in foster care and the criminal justice system.
- Children's Hospitals and Clinics of Minneapolis and St. Paul will get \$370,000 to continue a new demonstration project that provides special care to patients in the last stage of life.
- South St. Paul will get \$72,750 to help further enhance the parkland and trail systems around Port Crosby, a riverfront area that was once warehouses and stockyards.
- In addition to the Phalen Corridor funding, the bill also contains \$250,000 to rehabilitate and preserve 400 units of affordable rental housing in the Phalen Village neighborhood, in what is now called the Ames Lake super block.

McCollum aide Josh Straka also noted two items in the foreign operations section of special interest to the Hmong community. The bill contains \$19 million for assisting with refugee resettlement targeted to Hmong and Somali refugees. It also contains \$2.5 million to remove mines and unexploded bombs in Laos, which during the Vietnam War was hit with 2 million tons of bombs.

Around Minnesota, the Lewis and Clark water project in southwestern Minnesota received \$18.5 million, said U.S. Rep. Gil Gutknecht, R-Rochester. The controversial Upper Mississippi locks program, which the Bush administration and environmental groups together tried to kill, received funding, too. The bill contains \$51 million for the Mississippi River portions.

The Senate also paid tribute Friday to Dru Sjodin, a North Dakota college student who last year was abducted and murdered. Called Dru's Law, it will establish a national sex-offender registry for high-risk offenders. But the House declined to go along, prompting a strong objection from U.S. Rep. Mark Kennedy, R-Watertown.

"I am committed to doing everything possible to ensure we pass Dru's Law as soon as Congress comes back into session to prevent another tragedy that need not occur," Kennedy said.